

**THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY**

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

IN THE

CITY OF LARAMIE

AND

ALBANY COUNTY, WYOMING

For well over 200 years, people of all ages and backgrounds have relied on the public library – “The People’s University.”

Citizens come to the public library to access information. The information materializes in the traditional form of the print-on-paper of books and journals, on microforms, in various forms of media such as books-on-CD and DVDs, and now via electronically accessible resources.

Public libraries, moreover, have long been a cornerstone of our democratic system. The public library can be – and for many is – a place where persons of all walks of life meet to discuss, to learn from one another, and to take advantage of the library as a fundamental resource of ideas and information.

James Madison once warned, “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who wish to remain free must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.”

Funded primarily by the community it serves, governed locally, and used mainly by the people who pay for it via their taxes, the public library is a central physical and social place for the entire community. Access to the public library creates a level playing field for all people who come to it.

HISTORY AND LEGACY OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC LIBRARY

Public libraries are an American invention. Benjamin Franklin organized a subscription library that pooled books of Philadelphia residents in 1731. Franklin's "invention" was the forerunner of the public library we know today. The first free public library supported by taxation was established in Peterborough, New Hampshire, in 1833.

An Allegheny, Pennsylvania resident, James Anderson, made his 400 hundred volume library available to boys who worked in the town, one of whom was a telegraph messenger named Andrew Carnegie. After becoming a steel baron, a grateful Carnegie provided funding of some 50 million dollars for public library construction throughout the country and abroad. In all, Carnegie aided in the building of more than 2,500 public and academic libraries.

Today, libraries are more important than ever because reading is still the most basic survival skill in our information-driven society. For children from homes where the only book is might be the telephone book and the only magazine the TV listings, the public library is their one great hope. Renowned author James Michener said, prior to his death, "Libraries represent an individual's right to acquire knowledge. Without libraries, I would be a pauper, intellectually and spiritually."¹

¹ Michener, James. "How Stupid Can We Get?" *Reader's Digest*, April 1994.

AT THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

The public library is at the heart of a community's civic identity and sense of civic purpose.

Both by internal commitment and in response to necessity, the public library has been one of this country's most adaptable and versatile public institutions. Whether coping with the transformation and explosion of new information technologies, or with the major changes in character of our cities, towns, suburban communities and rural and farming areas, the public library has been on the "cutting edge" of America's growth and development. Libraries have blended older and newer information technologies while keeping pace with their communities' changing demographics and needs. In an era when many complain that our public institutions are not keeping up with the ever-accelerating pace of change, many public libraries are the exception.

Public libraries have not, of course, escaped the pressures of life today. Certainly not all public libraries have the resources of staff, equipment, and collections -- or the leadership and policies -- that enable them to fulfill their potential. This is certainly the case in Albany County, Wyoming.

Nonetheless, given the demands of life today, and as we face a new decade in a still-new millennium, the public library, more numerous on the American landscape than McDonald's restaurants, remains a crucial resource for the renewal of civic purpose.

As the Civil War began, President Abraham Lincoln told Congress “The people will save their government if the government will but give them the means to do it.” Today, people can and will “save themselves” if local governments and policy-makers -- and their constituents -- recognize and support the full potential of the public library.

Public libraries, as the embodiment of the democratic ideal, are uniquely democratic institutions. Their value as a critical component of a democratic society remains thoroughly engrained in our national psyche.

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

We are now in the midst of a third great wave of expansion of public libraries in this country.

- The first period of rapid growth was the result of Andrew Carnegie’s vision and largesse; his belief in the value of the public library in the development of a nation was steadfast, his financial support unparalleled
- The second period occurred during the third quarter of the 20th Century -- the result of the rapidly expanding and moving population of the United States; the trifecta of suburban growth, college and university expansion, and LSA and LSCA governmental support contributed to this period
- The third wave of tremendous growth in our public libraries is now underway, a period marked by the expansion of the capabilities of libraries to access and deliver information via electronic-driven technology; never before has the opportunity been so great for libraries, while, at the same time, there currently exists

a library building boom not experienced since the mid-1960s.

The stakes embodied in the third wave are high. To wit:

- Increasingly diverse constituencies are demanding increasingly diverse collections
- Interdisciplinary research is becoming the norm
- The expenses associated with technology and more buildings threaten already overtaxed library budgets
- Fee-based services and commercial contracts that may limit access to particular groups could result in a society of information rich and poor.

High stakes imply a high return:

- The opportunities for public libraries to fulfill their mission on a grand scale are real
- The delivery of information to economically-challenged residents in the same quality and time as that received in affluent settings addresses issues of equity like never before
- Electronic access to huge collections by small libraries brings resources heretofore undreamed of to their constituencies
- Libraries sharing resources over great distances break down barriers to learning.

Public library services have traditionally been provided without fees or user charges because of the accepted notion that such services benefit the community more than they benefit the individual user. In other words, public library services are viewed as a public good, meaning the services are not always but “usually provided by government for consumption by the general public.”² Public goods have two defining aspects:

- Public goods possess a “non-rival consumption” aspect, i.e., the availability of the good to all is not reduced by any one person’s consumption of the good
- Public goods have a “non-excludability” aspect in that there is no way to effectively restrict the benefits of public goods to those who directly pay for them.

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Public libraries make tremendous impacts on counties and cities.

A 2005 study conducted by the University of South Carolina looked at the economic impact of expenditures on public library services. The conclusion of the study was that South Carolina receives \$ 4.48 in value for every dollar spent; a 350 percent return on investment.³

² Moffat, D. W. *Economics Dictionary*, 2nd edition, New York, New York, Elsevier, c1983.

³ A link to the study can be found at <http://www.libsci.sc.edu/SCEIS/home.htm>

A year later a study of nine Southwestern Ohio counties found that for every dollar spent on library operations the public received about \$2.56 in directly quantifiable benefits.⁴

For nearly two decades it has been known that the public library-increases property values in a community. After extensive research,⁵ El Dorado County, California officials found that studies in a number of locales nationwide indicated libraries, if maintained and administered well, increased property values. There are a number of reasons for this certitude:

- Improved cultural, educational, and recreational opportunities for residents
- Increased property values because the existence of libraries increases the county’s (and/or city’s) capacity to draw businesses, home buyers, tourists, and others to the area
- Increased attractiveness of the area as a place to live.

The ability of a public library to serve as an “attractor” for business is another example of economic impact. It is no myth that when major corporations consider a new business location the presence of good public library service is one of the criteria used in determining the prospective location’s quality of life.

⁴ “VALUE FOR MONEY: Southwestern Ohio’s Return from Investment in Public Libraries.” Prepared by Levin, Driscoll & Fleeter, Columbus, Ohio, June 22, 2006.

⁵ Cooper, J. M. and M. C. Crouch. “Benefit Assessment Helps Open Doors of One Cash-Strapped California Library.” *American Libraries*, February 1994.

The existence of a public library in an area adds to the quality of life, thereby increasing it's attractiveness to business, thus aiding economic development.

Public libraries also create significant impacts by promoting literacy. The public library does this by offering space for literacy classes, by providing the necessary resources and training for literacy providers, and by raising awareness of the problems associated with illiteracy. A literate community is one that can be employed at higher-skilled, better-paying jobs. If the public library facilitates this employment, the impact of its services have had are considerable. Not only have individuals learned to read, they have been able to better their economic standing.

Providing job-seeking resources is another important economic development service public libraries provide. By building collections which teach resume writing and interviewing techniques and which help individuals explore alternate careers, by offering access to the classified sections of out-of-town newspapers, and by making the Internet and the employment opportunities therein available, the public library is a key resource for those seeking to change jobs or careers.⁶

The future belongs to those who plan for it!

⁶ Abend, Karen and Charles R. McClure, Ph.D. "Recent Views On Identifying Impacts From Public Libraries." *Public Library Quarterly*, Vol 17, Number 4, 1998.